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Eco-Imagination a Bust

Several hundred years ago, an unpalatable hardship was imposed on the citizens of Massachusetts by The British East India Company, a corporation whose thirst for profit, extracted from the colonies, outweighed all other considerations. The citizen response was immediate and ever since referred to as The Boston Tea Party, portrayed in our history lessons as an honorable response to an unjust and abusive power.

Last Thursday, General Electric presented its master plan for the remaining PCBs in Berkshire County, "The Corrective Measures Study." Which appears equally tainted; a self-serving fiat from a nearly departed entity, whose power and influence over this region at one time was without precedent. As GE pulls out of town, the impact of the remaining PCBs will outlast those, who at one time, might have spoken favorably about "The Company."

The audience was treated to a numbing series of charts and graphs, a product of computer modeling and technical wizardry. As the laser pointer directed our attention to the differences between SED3 and SED 8, it was hard to remember that the projections were really about living people and animals, about future generations, about PCB's impact on entire ecosystems and species, about how much sickness and how many deaths were acceptable. One needed to remind oneself that it was not about providing us with the best cleanup and the best technology currently available. The unmentioned subtext is about maximizing GE's profits.

Cost effectiveness is about trade-offs, about "bang for the buck," about abstracting "acceptable risk" into a projected bar graph. Morality, responsibility, leadership, partnership within and obligations to a community; none of these concepts are accepted contributions to a bottom line. Hypothetical goals and outcomes, abstracted numbers plugged into a program, generating soothing,

color-coordinated visualizations, representations of possibilities, as removed and distanced from real-world consequence as the laser guided, un-manned missile is from the destruction, loss, pain and death experienced by those on the ground. No one asks the victims if the risk was acceptable.

The time to complete the various cleanup strategies ranged from zero to 51 years. Technologies that not only promise, but deliver the destruction of PCBs are dismissed as unproven, expensive and potentially subject to breakdown. And unfortunately, even the most ambitious GE-derived plan leaves us with fish that cannot be freely eaten and water that cannot be enjoyed at the table. Our resources depleted, our land and river unusable without severe restrictions, The Company has left town for cheaper labor and less regulated pastures; has our complacency allowed this to be the acceptable byproduct of progress?

General Electric's preferred plan for disposal of the soil; sweep it under a rug. Dig it up and bury it in nearby, newly created landfills. This would run smack into Mayor Roberto's recent published statement that "the landfill will not be in Pittsfield." A man of integrity, I thank him for his advocacy of an alternative solution. Looking no further than Allendale, it is hard to imagine that Pittsfield or any other community would extend the welcome mat a second time.

Other GE suggestions: Dig it up and rebury it in the river. Seriously. No comment. Or dig it up and bury it in someone else's backyard, far away from Pittsfield, perhaps in upstate NY or Texas. Aside from the moral issue (which have never been considered, or even recognized) of making our poison someone else's problem, this solution's transportation costs begin to get expensive.

How is it possible for The Company to present a proposal that takes fifty years to complete, yet does not take into consideration the speed of innovation, technological breakthrough and unanticipated invention?

Minor changes in their study could produce major improvements in the outcome. For example: imagine a fifty year plan that allowed for flexibility and modification as innovation and discovery dictated. Imagine the results if, in 1920, a fifty-year design plan had been accepted for a national highway system that did not

incorporate flexibility. What a useless, costly failure it would have become had it not incorporated the initially unanticipated change in construction technology and materials, the creation and growth of population centers, the speed, size and design of future automobiles and trucks, etc.

The Company's proposal is mired in the past, relying on the worst that precedent has to offer. All this from a company that reminds us as often as their advertising budget allows of their "Ecomagination."

What is best for a corporation is not necessarily best for a community. Could this be a "Boston Tea Party Moment?" To paraphrase, "If we build a protest, will they come?"

Benno Friedman